DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 105 596 EA 007 016

AUTHOR Ebel, Robert L.
TITLE The Case for Corporal Punishment.
PUB DATE Apr 75
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (60th, Washington, D.C., March 31-April 4, 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *Behavior Change; *Behavior Problems; *Corporal Punishment; Elementary Education; *Student Rights; *Teacher Role

ABSTRACT

A young child who has not been taught to obey the directives of his parents or his teachers is liable to suffer serious consequences in a sometimes hostile environment. Teacher organizations tend to support retention, or reinstitution, of the possibility of using corporal punishment as one means of correction or control. Ultimately, the case for or against corporal punishment must rest on the effect it has on pupil achievement of whatever goals society has set for its schools. (Author/MLF)

ED105596

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

The Case for Corporal Punishmert*

Robert L. Ebel
Michigan State University

As I began to write this paper, it occurred to me that perhaps I should rent a costume to wear in presenting it - a red costume with horns and a tail with pitchfork and a satanic countenance. But then it also occurred to me that some of you would not need the help of a costume to recognize me for what I surely must be--an aggressive, vengeful, authoritarian beast; vicious, brutal, sadistic, inhuman. For to some, there is no possibility of proper or effective use of corporal punishment, no matter in what circumstances, no matter for what purpose, no matter with what discretion or restraint it might be applied. In the eyes of these people, the only justifiable policy is absolute prohibition of corporal punishment of any kind, now and forever more, as a means of correction or reproof.

I do not stand before you as an advocate of frequent infliction of severe physical pain on growing children. There are families, few I hope, in which young children are slapped or spanked daily; families in which a father may give one of his children "a good whipping" once or twice a week. I join in condemnation of such practices. I agree that there is something seriously wrong in homes where these things occur. But, I know, too, that there are homes and schoolrooms in which acts of serious and dangerous disobedience are never effectively corrected because the adults in charge have voluntarily disavowed, or have been prohibited from using corporal punishment. In these situations, adult responsibility for child control has been abandoned. A young child who has not been taught to obey the directives of his parents or his teachers is liable to suffer serious consequences in a

EA 007 016

*Prepared for presentation at the AERA Annual Meeting in Washington, D.C., April 2, 1975.

sometimes hostile environment. In one specific instance I know of, the consequences to the child were fatal. In other cases, the persistently disobedient child simply becomes a socially obnoxious brat.

In my elementary school days, there were persistent rumors in the school yard that the principal of Emerson School had, and might occasionally use, a rubber tube to administer corporal punishment. We speculated as to how much the rubber tube might hurt--probably a great deal more than an ordinary hand spanking with which some of us were better acquainted. We guessed that it probably would hurt more than a wooden paddle, or even a leather strap. None of us that I knew of ever fell victim to the rubber tube. But all of us were aware of its availability as the ultimate punishment for gross misbehavior. The possibility that it might be used made a difference, a generally desirable difference I believe, in our behavior.

Total prohibition of corporal punishment in any form, for any purpose, under any circumstances seems to be part of a movement in education whose objective has been to promote student freedom, to safeguard student rights, and to guard against the abuse of the authority by teachers in their control of student behavior. It seems reasonably clear that the consequences of this movement have been a deterioration of environments for learning in some schools, and a corresponding decline in school achievement that is being widely reported. I am not suggesting that restoration of corporal punishment would cure the ills of contemporary schools. But the attitude toward student behavior that includes outrage at the suggestion of corporal punishment is the same attitude that has made the role of the teacher increasingly difficult and frustrating. As a consequence, teacher organizations tend to support retention, or reinstitution, of the possibility of using corporal punishment as one means of correction or control.

Note that it is the <u>possibility</u> of corporal punishment that is being supported here, not its frequent use, or its severity. Corporal punishment is a means of

last resort when all else has failed. Some will say, "Better to fail than to use this means." That is a view which is being challenged in this paper.

Now education clearly is and ought to be much more concerned with developmental progress than with repressive restraint. Teachers properly emphasize the positive aspects of social and intellectual growth. They properly minimize the negative aspects of repressive punishment. But experience suggests very strongly that when the so called negative controls on behavior are totally eliminated, progress in educational development will suffer, sometimes quite seriously.

It is sometimes suggested that competent teachers can engage the interest of their pupils so completely, and motivate them so strongly, that behavior problems will never develop. It is said that any differences between pupil and teacher can be sidestepped by appropriate psychological finesse, and turned into a creative learning experience. There is much merit in both of these suggestions, if all that is implied is that these things can <u>often</u> be done. But here again, experience suggests that they cannot <u>always</u> be done. An otherwise capable teacher should not be disqualified for lack of special talent in these areas.

Further, and perhaps more importantly, high levels of concern for these aspects of teaching may actually inhibit good teaching. A teacher who is required, or elects to devote most of his creative energy to interesting and motivating pupils and most of his attention to finessing potential conflicts, may neglect the equally important, perhaps more important, job of instruction. To judge a teacher by his skill in avoiding behavior problems is to ignore the teacher's more basic responsibility for directing pupil learning.

The teacher who has least need for even occasional punishment is not necessarily the most effective educator. Situations which can sometimes be occasions of misbehavior can also contribute to useful learning. Responsibility for success in learning does not rest solely on the teacher. A teacher who successfully avoids

all circumstances which might cause problems also avoids helping pupils to learn how to deal with those problems. The world punishes misbehavior. Should not the school help pupils to learn this very important fact?

Ultimately, the case for or against corporal punishment must rest on the effect it has on pupil achievement of whatever goals society has set for its schools.

At first glance, this may seem to be a question for research to answer. A closer look, and some sober reflections on past experience with similar research problems, suggests that research is unlikely to provide any very definite answers.

There is first of all the problem of what accomplishments the school can be reasonably expected to foster. Is it limited to measurable outcomes in the usual subjects of study? Or does it encompass also subtle, intangible, or slow-to-mature attitudes, values, etc.?

Then there is the problem of experimental manipulation of human beings in the school environment. Dare we permit physical punishment in an experimental group and prohibit it in a control group for no better reason than to find out how it works? And if we do, can our findings from an artificial experimental situation be expected to generalize to different natural situations? Finally, and most seriously, can the effect of this variable (i.e., physical punishment) be isolated from other variables which also affect accomplishment? Even if it can, will the effect be strong enough, in a short run experiment, to yield statistically or practically significant findings?

A possible alternative to prospective experimental studies of the effects on learning of corporal punishment might be a retrospective survey of differences in pupil achievement between schools which tolerate and those which forbid corporal punishment. But here, too, the variable of interest is not easy to isolate from other influential variables. Schools which tolerate corporal punishment

may enroll pupils and employ teachers who differ systematically from those in schools that forbid such punishment.

The inherent difficulty of sound experimental or survey research on the effects of corporal punishment suggests that one should view with considerable skepticisim firm conclusions for or against its use that are allegedly based on research findings. Seldom does the scope of any particular research study justify a sweeping generalization that corporal punishment is or is not effective. Yet over and over in discussions of corporal punishment, data from a limited study of some particular aspect in some unique setting are used to support very general conclusions. Nor are these limited studies themselves usually free from defects of design or interpretation. The "weight of the evidence" from such studies may not be very heavy.

In discussions of corporal punishment, emotionally charged words and unsupported assertions are sometimes used in lieu of evidence or rational inference. A spanking is referred to as a "beating" or a "brutal assault". The motivation for correction is seen as simple "retaliation", made possible by the greater size and strength of the parent or teacher but not justified by any higher standards of conduct, or any sense of moral obligation. Evidence is seldom presented to support claims that children "learn aggression" from being punished, or that means of correction "far more effective" than corporal punishment are available.

Perhaps in the end we will have to rely on much more general, if much less rigorous, bases for inference. Several weeks ago an article in the New York Times Sunday Magazine contrasted the educational effects of free versus controlled school environments as seen by a perceptive and articulate parent. She found that the controlled environment was not only more productive educationally but also more satisfying to the pupil involved, her daughter. In this school, rather extensive use was made of rewards and punishments as instruments of control.

Most young people need control and know that they need it. Most prefer firm, consistent authoritative guidance to indecisive, uncertain vascillations in requirements, and unpredictable parent or teacher reactions. Most recognize the justice of punishment for some of the things they have done. Some, given the choice, prefer corporal punishment whose pain is quickly done with, to psychological punishment with its slower, more lingering psychic pain.

Assuming, for the sake of discussion, that punishment is occasionally necessary in guiding the development of young people (and in controlling the behavior of adults), can we say that psychological punishment (i.e., reproof, loss of privileges, isolation, time-out, etc.) is always preferable to physical punishment? I think not. Nor can we say that physical punishment is always preferable. The case I have been trying to make is that the possibility of carefully considered, carefully supervised, occasional use of moderate physical punishment should not be prohibited.

Let me conclude this presentation by setting forth thirteen propositions which may serve to summarize, supplement, and possibly rationalize the case for punishment as I see it. Note the significance of the number thirteen, a number much favored by devils, witches, and warlocks.

1. To punish is to impose a penalty for a fault, offense, or violation.
2. Socially sanctioned controls on individual behavior are necessary to group living, and punishment is one effective means of social control.
3. The need for punishment cannot be avoided by the use of rewards since withholding of a reward becomes automatically a form of punishment.
4. When punishment is administered by one with the authority and power to do so, it is almost always in response to an offense by the one punished. Seldom is it an expression of the punisher's "need to punish".
5. Punishment is intended more often and more directly to serve the needs of the group than to serve the needs of the individual.
6. The use of punishment is necessary to develop the child's sense of personal responsibility.

7. Habits of behavior established under threat of punishment may disappear once the threat is removed, unless as is usually the case, other good reasons for maintaining the behavior assume the behavior control function.

8. Punishment, judiciously applied, can strengthen the bonds of respect and affection between child and adult.

9. There are no good reasons to believe that psychological stress is less harmful or more lasting in its effects than physical pain.

10. Any form of punishment can be used wisely or abused.

11. As the child grows older, the effectiveness of physical punishment is likely to diminish, and the effectiveness of psychological punishment is likely to increase.

12. There are no good reasons to believe that unwise adults are more likely to misuse physical than psychological punishment.

13. The focus of an experimental research study on the effects of punishment is likely to be so narrow, so unique, so artificial, that the generalizability of the finding will be severely limited.